Bottleneck and Breakthrough: English Majors Education in China’s Colleges and Universities

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Abstract. For the teaching of English majors in China’s colleges and universities, the academic circles almost stick to the curriculum setting, teaching requirements, teaching principles, teaching methods as well as teaching testing and evaluation, which are involved in the National English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities. However, there are few discussions about the confusion caused by the one-sidedness and loopholes of the syllabus. These problems are mainly manifested in five aspects: 1. Teaching management is not professional and department leaders have no backgrounds majoring in foreign languages. 2. The allocation of teachers is unreasonable and one-sided emphasis is placed on the structure of academic qualifications. 3. There is no bottom line for students’ access and lack of awareness of selecting talents according to different majors. 4. The curriculum is not systematic, and it is very common to set a certain course because of somebody. 5. All-in-one evaluation in schools is not conducive to the promotion of teachers’ professional titles. For the above problems, we should start with the professional teaching syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education, and embody its solution or prevention in the revision and reconstruction of the syllabus. As for how to revise and revise the syllabus, our proposition has three points: firstly, make a thorough investigation and find out the current situation of English teaching; secondly, compile the English teaching syllabuses in different classifications to make the syllabuses of various colleges and universities have similarities and differences; lastly, integrate the internal and external requirements of English major and make the English teaching syllabus into a system engineering. Only in this way can English majors in China’s colleges and universities get out of the predicament and usher in the spring of reform and development.

Introduction

In April 2000, the Ministry of Education of China approved the implementation of the new syllabus for English majors in China’s Colleges and universities. According to the English Team of the Steering Committee for Foreign Language Majors in Colleges and Universities, which was responsible for the revision of the new syllabus at that time, the revision of the syllabus was “in view of the new requirements of the socialist market economy on the training mode of English majors in Colleges and universities in China, and in the past decade or so, there have been many changes in English teaching. The original two syllabuses have been unable to adapt to the new situation, so it is necessary to revise them accordingly. [1] Nowadays, 18 years have passed since the promulgation of the new syllabus. During this period, many new changes have taken place in the teaching of English majors in China’s colleges and universities. As a guide to all kinds of English majors throughout the country and a basis for organizing teaching, compiling textbooks and checking teaching quality for English majors in Colleges and universities, the syllabus for English majors in Colleges and universities has become difficult to use one same yardstick to solve all the new problems in the face of the new situation. As Professor Zhuang Zhixiang pointed out, “Objectively speaking, it is difficult for nearly 1,000 English major disciplines to adopt a syllabus and an examination evaluation system as the teaching and evaluation criteria because of the different time, type, geographical environment and
conditions of running schools, as well as the differences in the understanding of scholars and managers.” [2] Especially in science and engineering colleges, English majors have developed rapidly in recent years, but the present situation and effect of teaching in most science and engineering colleges are not optimistic. The numerous disorders and irregularities in the 2000 edition of the syllabus have shown that the syllabus has lagged behind and needs to be revised urgently. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education is still formulating a unified “guiding role for all kinds of English majors in the country”. Whether the syllabus is suitable or not, and whether it can meet the actual teaching needs, is also worth our further consideration and discussion.

Bottleneck of English Majors Education

Professor Cai Jigang's article in Wen Wei Po (2018-11-06) measures and characterizes most college English majors in China as “sorry for conscience majors” according to four criteria: training specifications, teaching content, self-development and professor's needs. He also illustrates that “English majors are very ill” by taking the professional revocation and student suspension in some colleges as examples. Then he puts forward that most college English majors in China should be “transformed into Special Purpose English and cultivate international compound talents of new engineering subjects”. [3] Whether or not Professor Cai Jigang holds the objective criteria and whether English majors are really sorry for their conscience, it seems that Professor Cai Jigang’s so-called “disease” is only a symptom of the profession, not the root cause, let alone whether his prescription really works.

In fact, since the mid-1980s, a number of key central and local universities of science and technology have taken the lead in setting up “English for Science and Technology” or “English for Specific Purposes”. Around 1985, nearly 20 universities of science and technology began to recruit undergraduates majoring in English for Science and Technology or ESP from high school graduates of science. After 1987, some colleges and universities also set up master's degree programs for ESP or linguistics and applied linguistics. [4] And then, some other foreign language colleges, comprehensive universities and universities of science and engineering have been experimenting with the cultivation of interdisciplinary foreign language talents. Nowadays, among thousands of undergraduate colleges and universities in China, except for some music colleges, sports colleges and art colleges which have not yet established English majors, almost all the other universities are recruiting English majors. [5] To be fair, over the past 30 years, English majors in Chinese universities have made great achievements and made great progress. On the other hand, due to the neglect of the different characteristics between different colleges and universities in National English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and Universities, there are various kinds of maladjustments happened in English majors in many colleges and universities. Especially because of the one-sidedness and loopholes of the syllabus, the problems of teaching management, teaching staff, students’ quality and teaching research have become the bottleneck hindering the development of English majors. Generally speaking, these problems are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

1. Teaching management is not professional and department leaders have no backgrounds majoring in foreign languages. Some colleges and universities neglect the particularity of English majors as liberal arts. Their appointed leaders are politically qualified but lack the academic backgrounds and professional accomplishment of foreign language majors. They often fail to understand the law of the development of this subject, so that they cannot set up reasonable specialties according to the English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors or organize standardized professional teaching, which ultimately affects the innovation and development of English majors.

2. The allocation of teachers is unreasonable and one-sided emphasis is placed on the structure of academic qualifications. Influenced by other disciplines, in the process of recruitment of new teachers, some personnel departments of school of foreign languages only pay attention to whether the applicants have a doctorate degree, but do not impose rigid requirements on their specialty, resulting in a group of teachers without English backgrounds settling down in English major, but teaching in
other departments. These people occupy the positions of English teachers, which seems to improve the structure of professional qualifications in school of foreign languages. In fact, it also causes the unreasonable allocation of teachers, and even leads to the shortage of English teachers.

3. There is no bottom line for students’ access and lack of awareness of selecting talents according to different majors. As a subject that emphasizes language acquisition, English majors have certain requirements for learners’ qualifications. However, many colleges and universities have ignored the specialty of English majors when recruiting students, especially when adjusting their majors on campus. Therefore, they have admitted some students with physical defects, such as stuttering and hearing impairment. This shows that some colleges and universities lack the awareness of selecting talents according to different majors, which reflects the marginalization of English majors’ status in some colleges and universities.

4. The curriculum is not systematic, and it is very common to set a certain course because of somebody. On the one hand, the English teachers are weak in their professional quality and abilities of scientific research and teaching. [6] On the other hand, the teachers are unreasonably allocated or they have higher educational background, but their majors are not corresponding, so they have no English teaching ability. [7] This leads to the fact that the courses offered by English majors in many colleges and universities are often set up for certain people, which leads to the unsystematic and unreasonable courses offered.

5. All-in-one evaluation in schools is not conducive to the promotion of teachers’ professional titles. Many colleges and universities take a same yardstick to measure the teaching and scientific research of all disciplines including English majors, and regard it as the standard of professional title promotion. For English majors, which are comparatively weak and marginalized, it not only affects teachers' personal title promotion and work enthusiasm, but also weakens and inhibits the existence and development of English majors.

Breakthrough Strategies

Reflecting on the above problems, the author believes that they are precisely the causes of all kinds of “illnesses” of English majors in colleges and universities. However, the solution lies not in Professor Cai Jigang’s idea of “transforming English majors into ESP”, but in building a more practical, reasonable and comprehensive mechanism that can truly regulate and restrict English majors, namely, revising and issuing a new professional syllabus. To this end, the following three points should be achieved:

First of all, make a thorough investigation and find out the current situation of English teaching. On the one hand, experts participating in the revision of the syllabus are required to go deep into representative colleges and universities to investigate and acquaint themselves with the current situation and problems of English teaching and development; on the other hand, they are required to pay attention to, collect and collate the research and discussion of English education in colleges and universities in the educational circles, and summarize the research results of the academic circles in this regard. [8] Only in this way can we grasp the focus, prescribe the right medicine, formulate a new syllabus to solve the problem and promote the development of the discipline.

Secondly, compile the English teaching syllabuses in different classifications to make the syllabuses of various colleges and universities have similarities and differences. While maintaining the basic and common professional tasks and objectives to be accomplished, the training specifications and characteristics of English professionals should be determined according to their respective characteristics and advantages. That is to say, different types of English teaching syllabus should be formulated according to the actual situation of different regions and colleges with distinctive nature of characteristics, which is also the embodiment and guarantee of the discipline's following the same development law and meeting the basic professional requirements.

Finally, integrate the internal and external requirements of English major and make the English teaching syllabus into a system engineering. Changing the old concepts and reconstructing the syllabus framework, the syllabus should be divided into two parts: the explanation of professional teaching itself and the stipulation of related issues. The syllabus should incorporate these “external”
factors such as teaching management, teacher allocation, student admission, promotion and evaluation into the syllabus’s normative system, so that these problems closely related to and interacted with the “internal” English teaching can be regulated and followed. According to the law, we can plug the loopholes in the root cause and make the teaching of English major really standardized.

Summary

Once the key link is grasped, everything else falls into place. For the current problems of English majors in China’s colleges and universities, we should start with the professional teaching syllabus issued by the Ministry of Education, and embody its solution or prevention in the revision and reconstruction of the syllabus. As for how to revise and revise the syllabus, our proposition has three points: firstly, make a thorough investigation and find out the current situation of English teaching; secondly, compile the English teaching syllabuses in different classifications to make the syllabuses of various colleges and universities have similarities and differences; lastly, integrate the internal and external requirements of English major and make the English teaching syllabus into a system engineering. Only in this way can English majors in China’s colleges and universities get out of the predicament and usher in the spring of reform and development. And also, based on the new syllabus, English majors can innovate and develop. It’s not far from taking off Professor Cai Jigang’s taunt hat of “Sorry for Conscience Major”!

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